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SUBJECT: RETHINKING ELIMINATION OF THE VOA TURKISH SERVICE

1. Summary: The proposed elimination of the VOA Turkish Service in FY-07 has unleashed an outpouring of protest in this country, particularly from those who are long-time friends of the United States. Over the last two years, listenership and usage of VOA radio, television, and Internet services in Turkey have shot up. In view of the increased emphasis the BBG is placing on broadcasting in the Muslim world and the prevalence of distortion and anti-U.S. bias in Turkey's media, it would be a serious mistake to cut the VOA Turkish Service. End Summary

Protests Resound From All Corners

2. Nazmi Bilgin, president of the Ankara Journalists' Association and the powerful Federation of Journalists' Associations of Turkey, contacted the Ambassador to express the "disappointment felt by hundreds of journalists throughout Turkey" over the proposed elimination of the VOA Turkish Service. In addition to protesting the impending loss of the VOA's Turkish radio broadcasts, he noted his first hand knowledge of large numbers of journalists at newspapers and magazines in cities and towns around the country who depend on the VOA Turkish website to keep up to date on U.S. policies and perspectives. He said: "The approval of this ill-advised proposal by the Broadcasting Board of Governors will inevitably have a very negative effect on your country's public diplomacy in Turkey."

3. The honorary president of the Turkish-American Business Council wrote that he has listened to VOA Radio since he was a child and stressed that generations of citizens in southern Turkey, of which he is a native, have depended on the VOA Turkish Service as their "most important" source of news. Mehmet Dulger, chairman of the Turkish parliament's international relations committee, told the Ambassador he strongly objects to the proposed elimination of the VOA Turkish Service and is concerned that the move sends the worst possible signal just as U.S.-Turkish relations begin to recover from deep rifts caused by the Iraq War. He described himself as a daily listener of VOA for decades, and he believed many other members of parliament listen to the VOA regularly as well.

A Solid Record of Growth

4. Statistics show that the VOA's Turkish Service has shown a significant increase in listenership in Turkey's extremely competitive media environment. According to the most recent audience survey conducted by Intermedia in Turkey, VOA Turkish radio listenership grew to 1.8 percent in May 2005, a 300 percent increase over 2003. VOA's Turkish Service is simulcast five hours per week nationwide on Turkey's highly respected NTV Radio and is broadcast seven hours per week on a large network of AM and FM affiliates throughout the country.

5. Last year, TGRT, one of Turkey's largest privately owned TV networks, started carrying a 30-minute news and magazine program produced by the VOA Turkish Service. According to AGB Nielsen, the program reached 2.5 million adults per week as soon as it was launched. The VOA Turkish website is also taking off fast, with the number of visitors growing 68 percent from 2003 to 2004 and 175 percent in 2005.

Why Now, Why Turkey?

6. The FY-07 BBG budget identifies the expansion of radio and television broadcasting in the Muslim world as one of its highest priorities. Given this, eliminating -- rather than increasing -- the VOA Turkish Service is counter-productive. Ninety-nine percent of Turkey's 74 million population is Muslim. Turkey is a regional power and important U.S. ally; a proponent of reform in neighboring Iraq, Iran, and Syria; and a partner in the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative. In light of its strategic importance as a Muslim-majority secular democracy, Turkey has attracted major new USG public diplomacy resources,

including a tripling of its Fulbright budget, making it the largest recipient of USG Fulbright funding in the world in FY-06. By any measure, such a valuable public diplomacy asset as Turkish language broadcasting should be expanded, not zeroed out.

17. Turks from all walks of life who have protested the proposed elimination of the VOA Turkish Service have told us that it is VOA's reliability and its objective, factual reporting of international news that they most value. One of the principal reasons cited by the BBG for the elimination of the Turkish service is the country's highly competitive media market, with hundreds of cable TV channels, local radio stations, and print publications. The most salient feature of Turkey's burgeoning media, however, is its irresponsible, manipulative brand of journalism. Misinformation and disinformation are common in the Turkish media, and there frequently appear strongly anti-American reports that can only be effectively countered by the truth -- which has been the VOA's stock in trade for decades. The most recent Pew Global Attitudes Report found that less than one-quarter of Turks hold a favorable view of the U.S. Given Turkey's cacophonous media and the obvious distortions it publishes and broadcasts, presenting clear and factual news about the U.S. and the world remains a good idea. This is what the VOA does best. The Mission urges that the proposed elimination of the VOA Turkish Service be reconsidered.

WILSON